A PACT Resource
Partnerships, Alliances, and Coordination Techniques

LISTENING, LEARNING, LEADING: THREE ESSENTIALS FOR COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP[1]

1. Leadership "Listening"

"In the old world, the leader was the person who came in the room and did all the talking," explains Chris Gates, founder and chairman of The Colorado Institute for Leadership Training. "In the new world, the leader is the person who comes in the room and asks really good questions and takes a lot of notes." This process is counterintuitive to traditional leadership, where the desire is to quickly fix the problem. Convening and then actively listening to all affected parties is not immediately efficient. Time spent in the process of listening to and analyzing responses, on the surface, seems to be time away from fixing the problem. Yet solutions derived from a process where leaders truly listen to the specific, and sometimes conflicting, needs of the parties are more effective in the long term.

Feedback Is Key to the Listening "Loop"

Many managers perceive that they are skilled at listening and incorporate it into problem solving and goal setting. Unfortunately, in most cases, the commitment goes no further than convening a focus group or two to test a preset plan. Collaborative leaders recognize the value of listening by convening regular sessions where all players have an opportunity to hear and be heard—to articulate their issues, values and needs, long- and short-term priorities and goals, and the barriers they face. Including every perspective is a key part of the process, listening to those involved in setting up the barriers and those running up against them.

Listening Can Be "Ugly"

One mark of a leader committed to collaboration is the willingness to listen, fairly, to opposing points of view. To gain consensus and common direction, all participants must feel that their opinions have been given honest, careful consideration, and that any future concerns will be listened to with an open mind.

Truly collaborative leaders seek out dissenting opinions through surveys, ongoing focus groups, and meetings with individuals—actively listening to those with

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[1] Collaborative Leadership. (2004h). *Collaborative leadership: Fundamental concepts: Facilitator's guide, p. 200x.* Retrieved April 14, 2008, from www.collaborativeleadership.org/pages/curriculum/manual_sections/Cl_fundamental_concepts_manual_facilitators_guide.pdf

different points of view. They recognize that long-term solutions cannot be crafted without considering all perspectives.

Listening Requires Ego Control

The traditional leadership personality can be a hindrance to collaboration; however, the biggest challenge is that of ego. Many people come to leadership positions with the presumption that **they** will have a certain amount of power and be in charge and in control, and will be able to impose their will upon others. We know through collaborative leadership, however, that now that you are empowered, you must empower others and use your power to listen to other voices.

Effective leaders come into every situation with a tool box of styles and skills and approaches. They know when to talk and when to listen, when to shout and when to whisper, when to fight and when to compromise.

2. Leadership Learning

It is not enough to listen. The information has to be processed, shared, and learned. For a collaborative effort to succeed, leaders must be able to process all of the input, identify commonalities, and use common interests to set goals and form alliances.

In essence, collaborative leaders have the ability to identify and communicate a shared vision. They ignore boundaries, and they use the input gained in the "listening" phase to build a collaborative vision.

Learning to Lead

"Leaders are born, not made" doesn't apply to collaborative leadership. Considerable teaching and learning is involved. Leaders need to learn how to change their approach when appropriate, to think as part of a group rather than solely as an individual. They need to learn systems thinking, or how to understand the relationships of ideas, groups, and patterns.

They also must learn to harness their egos and desire to be the "star" and recognize the benefits of collaboration. To do so, they must be able to understand how they, as individuals, gain when their organization succeeds as a result of their collaborative leadership.

Giving up ownership and control is difficult for old-school, ego-driven leaders. Sharing responsibilities is essential. They need to see, via participation in collaborations and coalitions, that giving up ownership and control is often the best route to maximizing other peoples' talents and resources. They can learn how to build power through sharing power.

Experience is the most effective teacher. "The ability to reflect on one's experience to try to assess the significance of what has happened and then to try to modify it,

if that's the appropriate insight from the reflection, seems to be critical to the process of continuing development and learning over a lifetime and also to becoming more effective as a leader," explains Howard Prince, director of the Center for Ethical Leadership at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas in Austin. "One of the things we need to develop in people is the ability to be self-reflective about experiences."

3. Leading: Knowing When Collaboration Works

Leaders also must recognize that, as effective as collaboration usually is, it is not always the best path to problem solving or achieving goals. Barriers occur "when a lead agency cannot be found; when there is a history of repeated ineffective interventions; when there is a substantial power differential among individuals or groups of stakeholders; when there is a history of antagonism between stakeholders; or when conflict has caused overload for partners." (B. Gray. *Collaborating: Finding Common Ground for Multi-Party Problems*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1989.) Other factors barring effective collaborative leadership include scarce resources, confidentiality issues, and, in particular, time pressures. Despite these contingencies, it is important to remember that, while all situations do not necessarily demand collaborative leadership, the vast majority do.

"There's probably a collaborative, consensus-based solution available on about 80 percent of issues," explains Chris Gates. "On 20 percent of the issues, you're going to have a fight, with a winner and a loser. Leaders need to be able to figure out when to fight, when to compromise, and when to take notes. Sometimes the most important thing for a leader to do is not say a word. And sometimes the most important thing for a leader to do is to interrupt somebody and stop them in their tracks and change the direction of the conversation. And it's the art of understanding which tool to pull.

"A master carpenter will come to your house with his big bag and box of tools and, what makes him a master carpenter is that he knows what tool to use to deal with what issue or what problem to create what thing. Well, good leaders are the same way."

The new realities for managers demand leaders with the complete "box of tools," leaders who are skilled at traditional management and committed to collaboration. Leaders who "own" the process of listening, learning, and leading.

"Listening, Learning, and Leading" is the motto of the National Community for Latino Leadership.

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